

Shvilei Pinches

Parshas Vayechi

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Parshas Vayechi 5771

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Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi—A Spark of Yaakov Avinu Followed in Yaakov's Path to Reveal that Everything Happens for the Best

We read In this week's parsha, parshas Vayechi: **וַיְחִי יַעֲקֹב בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם שִׁבְעַת עָשָׂר שָׁנָה, וַיְהִי יָמָיו יַעֲקֹב שְׁנַיִם שָׁנִים וָאַרְבָּעִים וּמֵאָת שָׁנָה**—“Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years; and the days of Yaakov, the years of his life, were one hundred and forty-seven years.” In the Midrash (B.R. 96,5), our blessed sages associate this possuk with Rabbeinu HaKadosh, Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi:

”בְּחַיָּוֵהוּ דְּרַבְּבִינֵנוּ שִׁבְעַת עָשָׂר שָׁנָה, וְהָיָה קוֹרָא עַל עֲצֻמוֹ, וַיְחִי יַעֲקֹב בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם י”ז שָׁנָה, וְחַיָּה יְהוּדָה בְּצִיפּוֹרֵי י”ז שָׁנִין. רַבִּינוּ י”ג שָׁנָה חֲשַׁשׁ בְּשִׁנּוּיָו, וְכֹל אוֹתָן י”ג שָׁנָה לֹא מָתָה חַיָּה [יּוֹלְדָת] בְּאֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְלֹא הִפְלִיחָה אִשָּׁה עוֹבְרָה בְּאֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל.

בְּסוּף י”ג שָׁנָה כַּעַס רַבִּינוּ עַל רַבִּי חַיָּה הַגָּדוֹל, נִכְנַס אֵלָיו ז”ל אֲצֵל רַבִּינוּ בְּדַמּוֹתוֹ שֶׁל רַבִּי חַיָּה, וְנִתְּן יָדוֹ עַל שִׁנּוֹ וּמִיָּד נִתְרַפָּא. לְמַחֵר נִכְנַס רַבִּי חַיָּה אֲצֵלוֹ, אָמַר לוֹ [לְרַבִּינוּ הַקְּדוֹשׁ], רַבִּי אוֹתָהּ שִׁינְךָ מָה הִיא עֲשׂוּיָה, אָמַר מִשְׁעָה שֶׁנִּתְּנָה יָדְךָ עָלֶיהָ אֲתָמוּל נִתְרַפָּא. בְּאוֹתָהּ שְׁעָה אָמַר רַבִּי חַיָּה, אֵי לָכֶם חַיּוֹת שְׁבֵאֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל, אֵי לָכֶם עוֹבְרוֹת שְׁבֵאֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל, [כִּי מֵעַתָּה לֹא תִּגַּן עֲלֵיכֶם יְסוּרֵי הַשִּׁנָּיִים שֶׁל רַבִּי], אֲפִילוֹ כֵּן אָמַר לוֹ, לֹא הָיִיתִי אֲנִי שֶׁנִּתְּנִי יָדִי עַל שִׁינְךָ, יָדַע רַבִּינוּ שְׂאֵלֵהוּ זְכוֹר לְטוֹב הָיָה, מֵאוֹתָהּ שְׁעָה הִתְחִיל לְנַהוֹג בְּרַבִּי חַיָּה כְּבוֹד.”

During his lifetime, he lived in Tzippori for seventeen years. He related this possuk: “Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years,” to himself—Yehudah lived in Tzippori seventeen years. Rabeinu suffered with his teeth for thirteen years; during those thirteen years, not a single woman in Eretz Yisroel died during childbirth, nor did any pregnant woman in Eretz Yisroel miscarry.

At the end of those thirteen years, Rabbi became angry with the elder Rabbi Chiya; Eliyahu, z”l, visited Rabeinu in the form of Rabbi Chiya; he placed his hand on his tooth and it healed instantly. When Rabbi Chiya visited Rebbe the next day, he said to him [to Rabeinu HaKadosh], ‘How is your tooth feeling?’ He replied, ‘The moment you laid your hand on it yesterday, it was healed.’ At that moment, Rabbi Chiya proclaimed, ‘Woe is to you, women in childbirth in Eretz Yisroel; woe is to you, pregnant women in Eretz Yisroel [for you no longer have Rebbe’s dental ailments to protect you]. Nevertheless, he said to Rebbe, ‘It was not I who put my hand on your tooth.’ Then Rabeinu realized that the visitor had been Eliyahu HaNavi; from that moment, he began treating Rabbi Chiya with greater respect.

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We must explain: (a) why did Rabeinu HaKadosh compare himself to Yaakov Avinu? (b) what is the significance that they lived in Tzipori and in Egypt, respectively, for seventeen years? (c) why does the Midrash relate the story concerning Rabeinu HaKadosh's dental ailment?

נִיצוּץ שֶׁל יַעֲקֹב אַבְיָנוּ Is an Abbreviation for נָשִׂיא

A Spark of Yaakov Avinu

As to why Rabeinu HaKadosh compared himself to Yaakov Avinu, we find an explanation from the divine kabbalist, the author of the Megaleh Amukos on the Torah. Based on the Arizal's teaching that Rabeinu HaKadosh was a spark from the neshomeh of Yaakov Avinu, the Megaleh Amukos (Vayechi, Vaetchanan 83) explains the reason for the title Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi. The word "nasi," **נָשִׂיא**, stands for **נִיצוּץ שֶׁל יַעֲקֹב אַבְיָנוּ**—a spark of Yaakov Avinu's. This also explains why Rabeinu HaKadosh associated the verse above with his own life: **וַיַּחֲיוּ יַעֲקֹב בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם י"ז שָׁנָה, וְחַיָּה יְהוּדָה בְּצִיפּוּרֵי י"ז שָׁנִין**. He was alluding to the fact that he possessed a spark of Yaakov Avinu's and, therefore, his life mirrored Yaakov Avinu's in certain aspects.

It is worth adding a nice tidbit based on a fascinating piece of information pointed out by the great Rabbi Yosef Engel, ztz"l, in his sefer Beis Otzar (33). There are eighteen places in the Talmud Bavli where statements in the name of Rebbe are introduced by the phrase: **"אָוֹמֵר אֲנִי"**—"I say." This is perplexing in light of the fact that Chazal attest to Rebbe's tremendous humility (Sotah 49.): **"מִשְׁמַת רַבִּי בִּטְלָה עֲנוּהָ"**—"from the time of Rebbe's death, humility became extinct." It would seem out of character, therefore, for him to preface a statement with the phrase **"אָוֹמֵר אֲנִי"**—"I say," which connotes egotism.

Based on what we have just learned, in conjunction with the holy Zohar's teaching (Vayetzei) that Yaakov Avinu represents the pillar of Torah, we can suggest the following: when Rabeinu HaKadosh wished to express a halachic opinion, he would preface his words with the phrase **"אָוֹמֵר אֲנִי"**, since the word **"אֲנִי"** is an abbreviation for **נִיצוּץ שֶׁל יַעֲקֹב אַבְיָנוּ**—a spark of Yaakov Avinu. In other words, he was conveying the message that his teaching was not the product of his own wisdom or insight but was, in fact, due to the presence of Yaakov Avinu's spark within him—Yaakov Avinu the pillar of Torah.

The specific comparison drawn between Rabeinu HaKadosh and Yaakov Avinu still remains to be explained. What is the deeper significance between the fact that Yaakov Avinu lived in Egypt for seventeen years and Rabeinu HaKadosh lived in Tzipori for seventeen years?

Seventeen Is the Numerical Value of ט"ז

Let us begin with the commentaries of the Toldos Yaakov Yosef and the Teshuos Chen on the possuk: **"וַיַּחֲיוּ יַעֲקֹב בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם שֶׁבַע עָשָׂר שָׁנָה"**—"Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years"—based on the statement in the Gemorah (Berachos 60:): **"תְּנָא מִשְׁמִיָּה דְרַבִּי עֲקִיבָא, לַעֲוֹלָם, לַעֲוֹלָם"**—"It was taught in the name of Rabbi Akiva, one should always be in the habit of saying, 'All that the Merciful One does is for the best.'"

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Now, the word **טו"ב**, meaning "good," has a numerical value of seventeen. So, the verse above--"Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years"—conveys the following: when Yaakov was in exile in Egypt, he accepted the fact that all that transpired was for the best—he dwelt there for seventeen years alluding to the fact that it was in his family's best interest.

Let us proceed to embellish their holy words. Why did Yaakov merit this achievement—accepting that all that Hashem does is for our benefit--specifically in the land of Egypt? Originally, Yaakov thought that Yosef was dead and he suffered greatly, as he states (Bereishis 37,35): **כִּי אָרַד אֶל בְּנִי**—**“For I will go down to the grave mourning over my son.”** Afterwards, when he learns that Yosef is still alive and of his rise to power in Egypt, he fears that his son has been tainted by the impure influences of Egypt.

Yet, after going down to Egypt, he sees the kedushah radiating on Yosef's face, as it is written (ibid. 46,30): **אֲמוֹתָהּ הַפֶּעַם אַחֲרֵי רֵאוֹתַי פְּנִיךָ כִּי עוֹדֵךְ חַי**—**“I can die this time, after having seen your face, because you are still alive.”** He then realizes that not only did Yosef sanctify himself in Egypt, he even managed to pave the way for all of Yisroel to sanctify themselves. This is expressed in the Midrash (V.R. 32,5): **אָמַר יוֹסֵף יֵרֵד לְמִצְרַיִם וְגֵרָר עֲצָמוֹ מִן הָעֲרוּהָ, וְנִגְדְּרוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּזִכְרוֹתָיו. אָמַר יוֹסֵף יֵרֵד לְמִצְרַיִם וְגֵרָר עֲצָמוֹ מִן הָעֲרוּהָ, כִּדְאִי הָיָה גֵרָר עֲרוּהָ בְּעֲצָמוֹ שֶׁנִּגְאָלוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל יְדוּ**—Yosef guarded himself from immorality in Egypt and Yisroel guarded themselves, as well, in his merit.

Thus, Yaakov realized the enormous favor underlying Yosef's going down to Egypt. It was for this reason that Hashem arranged for Yosef to be sold into slavery and end up in Egypt at the age of seventeen—as we see in the possuk (Bereishis 37,2): **יוֹסֵף בֶּן שֶׁבַע עָשָׂר שָׁנָה הָיָה רוּעָה אֶת**—**“Yosef, at the age of seventeen years, was a shepherd with his brothers by the flock.”** There was a concealed **טו"ב** (numerical value of seventeen), benefit, underlying his sale into slavery. Therefore, we learn that “Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years”—during these years that he spent with Yosef in Egypt, he witnessed his son's immense kedushah and realized that all that they had endured was a manifestation of **טו"ב** (good) equivalent to **שבע עשרה** (seventeen).

Thirty-three Years that Were Taken Away from Yaakov

Now, let us enjoy the wonders of Torah, as we explain in greater depth why Yaakov Avinu achieves this realization and this form of service to Hashem specifically in Egypt. There he learns to accept that all of the calamities and the suffering have been for his own good—represented by **שבע עשרה**—**שנה** which alludes to **טו"ב**. This explanation is based on the verses in parshas Vayigash (Bereishis 47,8): **וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה אֶל יַעֲקֹב כַּמָּה יָמֵי שְׁנֵי חַיֶּיךָ, וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֶל פַּרְעֹה יָמֵי שְׁנֵי מִגְרֵי שְׁלוֹשִׁים—וּמֵאֵת שָׁנָה, מֵעַט וְרַעִים הָיוּ יָמֵי שְׁנֵי חַיִּי, וְלֹא הִשְׁיִגוּ אֶת יָמֵי שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי אֲבוֹתַי בְּיָמֵי מִגְרֵיהֶם**—**“Pharaoh said to Yaakov, ‘How many are the days of the years of your life?’ Yaakov said to Pharaoh, ‘The days of the years of my sojourns have been one hundred and thirty years; few and bad have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not reached the days of the years of the lives of my forefathers in the days of their sojourns.’”**

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The commentary of the Daas Zekeinim from the Tosafists (ibid.) cites an unbelievable Midrash concerning these verses:

“בשעה שאמר יעקב מעט ורעים היו, אמר לו הקב"ה אני מלטתיך מעשו ומלכך והחזרתי לך דינה גם יוסף, ואתה מתרעם על חייך שהם מעט ורעים, חייך שמנין התיבות שיש מן 'ויאמר' עד 'בימי מגוריהם', כך יחסרו משנותיך, שלא תחיה כחיי יצחק אביך, והם ל"ג תיבות, ובמנין זה נחסרו מחייו, שהרי יצחק חי ק"פ שנה ויעקב לא חי אלא קמ"ז”.

HKB”H takes issue with Yaakov for describing the days of his life as “few and bad.” He points out that He saved Yaakov from Eisav and Lavan and returned both Dinah and Yosef to him. As a consequence, HKB”H decrees that He will shorten Yaakov’s life by the same number of years as the number of words in these verses beginning from ‘ויאמר’ until ‘בימי מגוריהם’. In other words, he will not live to be one hundred and eighty years old as his father Yitzchak did; rather, he will only live to be one hundred and forty seven years old. Just as there are thirty-three words in those verses, so, too, his life will be shortened by thirty-three years.

An interesting question is posed in the name of Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz, ztz”l. He wonders why Yaakov is punished even for Pharaoh’s words which are contained within the thirty-three words in those verses. Seemingly, he should only be held accountable for his response to Pharaoh. He resolves his inquiry based on the commentary of the Daas Zekeinim (ibid.):

“כמה ימי שני חייך. פשט לפי שראהו זקן מאד, ושערות ראשו וזקנו לבנות מרוב הזקנה שאל כן, והוא ענהו ימי מגורי שלשים ומאת שנה מעט ורעים, כלומר מעטים הם שנותי, אלא מתוך רעות שהיה לי קפצה עלי זקנה”.

Pharaoh’s question was prompted by Yaakov’s aged appearance--his hair and beard were white suggesting old age. Yaakov replied that although his years were few, they were bad—causing the appearance of old age. For this reason, Yaakov was held accountable and punished for Pharaoh’s question, as well: “כמה ימי שני חייך”—“How many are the days of the years of your life?” After all, Pharaoh’s question was prompted by Yaakov’s aged appearance which was the result of his not having accepted his suffering and heavenly decrees lovingly.

A Tzaddik Falls so that He Can Elevate Yisroel

Now, my heart longs to set the record straight concerning Yaakov Avinu’s behavior in this matter. Our blessed sages, in the Midrash (B.R. 76,1), attest to the fact that our grandfather, Yaakov Avinu, was “הבחור שבאבות”, the elite of the Patriarchs. Additionally, the entire, holy people, children of the one and only true G-d, are named “Yisroel” after him. How is it even possible to entertain the thought that he failed to accept his suffering gladly and that he was deprived of thirty-three precious years of his life as punishment?

An explanation can be proposed based on the amazing teachings of the holy Baal Shem Tov, zy”a. Occasionally, the Holy One, Blessed is He, trips up the tzaddik, so that he will intensify his efforts to

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elevate himself spiritually. In the process, he is able to elevate the rest of Yisroel, as well, who are not on his spiritual level. In the words of the Toldos Yaakov Yosef (Behar 15):

“דשמעתי בשם הרב המגיד [רבי מנחם מענדל] מבאר על פסוק (תהלים פד ז) עוברי בעמק הבכא וגו', שכמו שענין ירידת הצדיק בפתחי גיהנם, הוא להעלות נשמות הרשעים שהרהרו בתשובה בעולם הזה על ידו, כך הענין בעולם הזה, בכל יום ויום, או באיזה זמנים שיורד הצדיק ממדריגתו, כדי שיתחבר את עצמו עם אותן הפחותין במעלה, שלא עלו כלל או שעלו וירדו ממדריגתן, ועכשיו כשיורד הצדיק גם כן ממדריגתו ויחבר את עצמו עמהן, אזי כשיחזור ויעלה למדריגתו אזי אגב יעלה עמו.”

In this manner, the Baal Shem Tov, zy”a, explains the Mishnah (Rosh HaShannah 29.): **זיה הכלל כל**—“this is the general rule: whoever is not obligated in a particular matter is not qualified to cause the public to fulfill their obligation. The purpose of a tzaddik’s service in this world is to bring Yisroel closer to their father in heaven and to return them to the proper path. Nevertheless, he is unable to elevate Yisroel regarding a particular matter unless he, too, is somewhat lacking in that matter. Therefore, it is necessary for him to drop slightly from his elevated spiritual level, in order to order to fulfill his purpose. Then, as he rises, he will raise the rest of Yisroel along with him.

Yaakov’s Decline Served a Greater Purpose

Based on this concept, we can suggest with the utmost reverence and love that when Yaakov Avinu, “the elite of the Patriarchs,” complained to Pharaoh: **“מעט ורעים היו ימי שני חיי”**—“**few and bad have been the days of the years of my life**”—it was heavenly ordained. By means of this spiritual decline, he served the greater good, in the sense of (Tehillim 66,5): **“נורא עלילה על בני אדם”**—“**He is awesome in deed to mankind.**” This minor fall motivated him to enhance his efforts to correct his flaws and to accept his suffering lovingly. In the process, he paved the way for all of Yisroel, during the exile in Egypt and the other exiles, to elevate themselves along with him by accepting their suffering willingly.

When Yaakov arrived in Egypt, he beheld the tremendous kindness that HKB”H had performed on his behalf. Not only was his beloved Yosef still alive and still righteous and devout, but he had blazed the way for all of Yisroel to remain devout and sanctified in Egypt. As is the way of tzaddikim, he searched his soul and realized that it was incumbent upon him to atone for his inappropriate comments to Pharaoh. Therefore, he began teaching his children the invaluable lesson that everything that the Merciful One does is for the best.

This, then is the interpretation of the possuk: **“ויחי יעקב בארץ מצרים שבע עשרה שנה”**—“**Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years.**” The word **“שנה”**, which means year, comes from the same root as the word to teach; hence, the derivation of the word “mishnah.” So, this verse is alluding to the fact that when Yaakov arrived in Egypt and beheld HKB”H’s hidden kindness, he began teaching his children the lesson and concept of **“שבע עשרה”**, seventeen. In other words, he

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inculcated in them the belief and understanding that everything HKB”H does, even at times when His Presences appears to be concealed, is a form of “שבע עשרה”—which is the numerical equivalent of the word טו”ב, meaning good.

Yaakov Avinu Instituted Krias Shema before His Death

Based on this introduction, I wish to present my own thoughts concerning the institution of krias shema by Yaakov Avinu before his death. Concerning the possuk in our parsha (49,2), the Midrash elaborates:

“הקבצו ושמעו בני יעקב, מכאן זכו ישראל לקריאת שמע. בשעה שהיה יעקב אבינו נפטר מן העולם, קרא לשנים עשר בניו, אמר להם, שמעו אל ישראל שבשמים אביכם, שמא יש בלבבכם מחלוקת על הקב”ה. אמרו לו, שמע ישראל אבינו, כשם שאין בלבך מחלוקת על הקב”ה, כך אין בלבנו מחלוקת, אלא ה’ אלקינו ה’ אחד... הדא הוא שישראל משכימים ומעריבים בכל יום ואומרים, שמע ישראל אבינו ממערת המכפלה, אותו דבר שצויתנו עדיין הוא נוהג בנו, ה’ אלקינו ה’ אחד.”

As Yaakov Avinu prepared to depart from this world, he gathered together his twelve sons. He asked whether any of them had any quarrels with their Father in Heaven. They replied to their father Yisroel, “Just as you are at peace with HKB”H, so, too, are we—in our hearts there is only one—Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is One”. . . So, Yisroel proclaim every day and every night, “Hear O Yisroel, our father, from the Mearas HaMachpelah, that which you commanded us is still being practiced, Hashem is our G-d Hashem is One.”

Why did Yaakov see fit to institute krias shema before his death? We can suggest an explanation based on what the author of the Noda B’Yehudah wrote in the Tzlach (Pesachim 56.). He addresses the meaning of the well-known possuk declaring the oneness of Hashem (Devarim 6,4): **שמע** “**Hear O Yisroel, Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is One.**” The name הוי”ה represents the attribute of mercy and the name **אלקים** represents the attribute of justice. This possuk is a declaration that הוי”ה and **אלקים** are, in reality, one and the same. What may appear to us as justice emanating from the name **אלקים** is, in fact, mercy emanating from the name הוי”ה. In other words, “ה’ אחד”—there is only one G-d.

This helps clarify why Yaakov specifically instituted krias shema before his death. Upon realizing that he was about to depart this world even though he was only one hundred and forty-seven years old, he pondered, as tzaddikim do, why HKB”H shortened his life by thirty-three years; why was he not going to live to be one hundred and eighty years old as his father did? In his great humility, he concluded that he had yet to make amends for his inappropriate words to Pharaoh: **מעט ורעים היו** “**few and bad have been the days of the years of my life.**” To remedy the situation, he instituted krias shema for all of Yisroel by openly declaring: “שמע ישראל ה’ אלקינו ה’ אחד”—**“Hear O Yisroel, Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is One.”** He wished to instill in them the firm belief

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that one must praise Hashem with a berocheh for what appears to be bad just as one would for the obvious good.

Rabeinu HaKadosh—A Spark of Yaakov's Begins with the Mitzvah of Krias Shema

Come and see, based on what we have just discussed, how this enlightens us to a small degree as to why Rabeinu HaKadosh chose to begin Torah she'b'al peh with the mitzvah of krias shema (Berachos 2.): **“מאימתי קורין את שמע בערבין”**—“When do we begin reciting the shema in the evening?” In the sefer Ben Yehoyada, authored by the holy Rabbi Yosef Chaim of Bavel, ztz”l, (ibid.), he explains the matter based on the teachings of the Arizal. Since Rabeinu HaKadosh was a spark of Yaakov Avinu’s, and Yaakov Avinu instituted krias shema before his death, it was fitting that Rabeinu HaKadosh should begin the Mishnayos with the mitzvah of krias shema.

Let us now add another dimension to this discussion. The Gemorah states (Gittin 60:): **“דברים שבעל פה אי אתה רשאי לאומרן בכתב”**—“Oral matters, you are not permitted to put in writing.” By law, it is prohibited to write down Torah she'b'al peh. Despite this law, Rabeinu HaKadosh committed the six orders of the Mishnah to writing containing the entire Torah she'b'al peh. He did so in keeping with the dictum (Tehillim 119,126): **“עת לעשות לה' הפרו תורתך”**—“For it is a time to act on behalf of Hashem, since they have voided your Torah.” Rebbe feared that due to the hardships of exile, Torah would be forgotten from Yisroel. The Rambam describes this decision as follows (Introduction to the Yad HaChazakah):

“ולמה עשה רבינו הקדוש כך, ולא הניח הדבר כמות שהיה, לפי שראה שתלמידים מתמעטין והולכין והצרות מתחדשות ובאות, ומלכות רומי פושטת בעולם ומתגברת, וישראל מתגלגלין והולכין לקצוות, חיבר חיבור אחד להיות ביד כולם, כדי שילמדוהו במהרה ולא ישכח.”

He explains that Rabeinu HaKadosh saw that students were decreasing in number, the hardships were increasing, the Roman Empire was spreading throughout the world and Yisroel were scattering to the corners of the globe. Therefore, he compiled a single curriculum of study that would be available to all, that they could learn quickly and which would not be forgotten.

Clearly, while in exile, it requires greater inner strength to praise Hashem for the bad as well as the good and to believe wholeheartedly that the hardships are for the best. Now, we have established that Rabeinu HaKadosh was referred to as **“נשי”א - נ'יצוצו של י'עקב א'בינו**, “nasi,” because he possessed a spark from Yaakov Avinu’s neshomeh. Additionally, we have explained how Yaakov Avinu’s seemingly inappropriate words to Pharaoh—“few and bad have been the days of the years of my life”—were part of a divine scheme to benefit Yisroel during their years in exile—teaching them to accept the decrees of exile gladly.

With this in mind, Rabeinu HaKadosh devised a method for all of Yisroel to remember the invaluable lesson of krias shema that Yaakov Avinu instituted before his death. By opening Torah she'b'al peh with the subject of the nightly recitation of krias shema, we always remember our unwavering belief:

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“שמע ישראל ה' אלקינו” —even what might appear to be an act of justice emanating from the name “elokim,” is truly an act of mercy from the name “havaya”—for we know in our hearts and proclaim openly “ה' אחד”. He specifically chose the nighttime krias shema, since nighttime alludes to the darkness and hardships experienced during times of exile.

In His Lifetime He Lived in Tzipori Seventeen Years

Continuing along this path, let us explore the deeper significance behind the statement in the Midrash: **“בחינו היה דר בצפורי שבע עשרה שנה, והיה קורא על עצמו, ויחי יעקב בארץ מצרים: י"ז שנים”**—“During his lifetime, he lived in Tzipori for seventeen years. He related this possuk: “Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years,” to himself—Yehudah lived in Tzipori seventeen years. “ Although, he was, in fact, a spark of Yaakov Avinu’s, what purpose was served by revealing this fact publicly?

As explained, Yaakov realized that he had to make amends for his comments to Pharaoh. For this reason, he dwelt in Egypt for precisely seventeen years—teaching Yisroel the invaluable lesson that even in exile there is a concealed benefit, a **טו”ב**—which is alluded to by the fact that **טו”ב** has a numerical equivalent of seventeen.

Similarly, Rabeinu HaKadosh, a spark of Yaakov Avinu’s, continued to disseminate this very same lesson. He, too, spent specifically seventeen years in Tzipori—to reemphasize this important lesson to all of Yisroel that everything the Merciful One does is for the best.

This also explains why the Midrash goes on to describe Rabeinu HaKadosh’s dental ailment: **“רבינו י”ג שנה חשש בשיניו, וכל אותן י”ג שנה לא מתה חיה בארץ ישראל ולא הפילה אשה עוברת”**—he suffered with his teeth for thirteen years, during which time no woman in childbirth died nor did any pregnant woman miscarry throughout the land of Yisroel. This incident demonstrates for us that the suffering of a tzaddik provides a benefit for the rest of his generation. Further proof of this fact can be found in what happened after Eliyahu HaNavi came and cured him of his dental ailment. **“אמר רבי חייא, אי לכם חיות שבארץ ישראל, אי לכם עוברות שבארץ”**—Rabbi Chiya asserts that the women in childbirth and the pregnant women in Eretz Yisroel are no longer protected.

The Words **רבי עקיבא** Can Be Rearranged to Spell **אבי ר יעקב**

I wish to conclude by proposing an interesting thought to our respected readers concerning the following statement in the Gemorah (Berachos 60:): **“תנא משמיה דרבי עקיבא, לעולם יהא אדם: רגיל לומר כל דעביד רחמנא לטב עביד”**—It was taught in the name of Rabbi Akiva, one should always be in the habit of saying, “Everything the Merciful One does is for the best.” We need to understand why Rabbi Akiva, specifically, merited to teach this crucial lesson.

In Likutei Torah on this week’s parsha, the Arizal reveals to us that Rabbi Akiva was also a spark of Yaakov Avinu’s. This is alluded to in the possuk where Yaakov Avinu blesses Yosef before his death (Bereishis 49,24): **“מידי אביר יעקב משם רועה אבן ישראל”**—“from the hands of the Protector

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of Yaakov—from there, shepherd of the stone of Yisroel.” The words **אבי"ר יעק"ב** are an anagram of **רב"י עקיב"א**, i.e. both sets of words contain the same letters merely rearranged in a different order.

This fact is described in greater detail in the Seder HaDoros quoting the Arizal's Sefer HaGilgulim (p. 25 column 2). Just as Yaakov shepherded his father-in-law Lavan's sheep, so, too, Rabbi Akiva was a shepherd for his father-in-law, Kalba Savua; just like Yaakov had two wives—Rachel and Leah—so, too, did Rabbi Akiva—Rachel the daughter of Kalba Savua and the wife of Turnusropus after she converted; just as Rabbi Akiva was a spark of Yaakov Avinu's, so, too, his wife Rachel was a spark of our mother Rachel, Yaakov's wife.

For this reason, Rabbi Akiva, a spark of Yaakov Avinu's, had a vested interest in making amends for Yaakov's comment to Pharaoh: “few and bad have been the days of the years of my life.” As we have learned, Yaakov taught all of Yisroel in Egypt that every calamity conceals some benefit; so, too, Rabbi Akiva, Yaakov Avinu's spark, teaches all of Yisroel: **“לעולם יהא אדם רגיל לומר כל דעביד—רחמנא לטב עביד”**—**“It was taught in the name of Rabbi Akiva, one should always be in the habit of saying, “All the Merciful One does is for the best.”** Both messages are essentially the same. Incredibly, the Gemorah relates the following concerning Rabbi Akiva's death (Berachos 61:):

“בשעה שהוציאו את רבי עקיבא להריגה זמן קריאת שמע היה, והיו סורקים את בשרו במסרקות של ברזל והיה מקבל עליו עול מלכות שמים, אמרו לו תלמידיו רבינו עד כאן, אמר להם כל ימי הייתי מצטער על פסוק זה, בכל נפשך, אפילו נוטל את נשמתך, אמרתי מתי יבא לידי ואקיימנו, ועכשיו שבא לידי לא אקיימנו, היה מאריך באחד עד שיצתה נשמתו באחד, יצתה בת קול ואמרה, אשריך רבי עקיבא שיצאה נשמתך באחד.”

“When Rabbi Akiva was taken out to be executed, it was the time to recite krias shema. They were combing his flesh with iron combs, yet he was accepting upon himself the yoke of heavenly sovereignty. His students said to him, ‘Our teacher, even to this extent?’ He said to them, ‘All my days, I was troubled by this verse—with all your soul—even if he takes your soul. I said to myself: When will I have the opportunity to fulfill this verse? Now, that I have the opportunity, should I not fulfill it?!’ He lingered on the word “echod” until his soul departed with “echod.” A heavenly voice called out and proclaimed, ‘Fortunate are you, Rabbi Akiva, that your soul departed as you said “echod.”’

In light of the fact that Rabbi Akiva was a spark from Yaakov Avinu's neshomeh, it is understandable that he was concerned his entire life with how he could lovingly fulfill the possuk: **“שמע ישראל ה'—אלקינו ה' אחד”**. As stated, this possuk conveys our belief that “Hashem is one”—that even what appears to be justice is, in fact, mercy. He longed to make amends for Yaakov's comment to Pharaoh: **“מעט ורעים היו ימי שני חיי”**—**“few and bad have been the days of the years of my life.”** Therefore, he lingered on the word “echod” in order to accept the painful torture willingly. Witnessing this extraordinary example of self-sacrifice, the heavenly voice proclaimed: **“אשריך רבי—עקיבא שיצאה נשמתך באחד”**—**“Fortunate are you, Rabbi Akiva, that your soul departed as you said “echod.”**